

Chapter 1

The Philadelphia Campaign

June – September 1777

“Our people behaved well but Heaven frowned upon us in a degree. We were obliged to retire after a very considerable slaughter of the enemy.”¹

— Henry Knox, Chief of Artillery, Continental Army, September 1777

George Washington spent the six months after his victories at Trenton and Princeton in late December 1776 and early January 1777 around Morristown, New Jersey, building a new army nearly from scratch. His one-year enlistments—which comprised most of his army in 1776—had expired. During the long and arduous process, Washington harassed British outposts scattered across northern New Jersey in a series of raids and skirmishes. Fortunately for him, British Gen. William Howe was more concerned with strategic planning and writing letters to London than with what he considered the minor doings of the Continental Army.²

Between January and June 1777, these small-scale raids and skirmishes were the only military operations that took place in northern New Jersey. The American

1 Noah Brooks, *Henry Knox: A Soldier of the Revolution* (New York, 1900), 104.

2 For more information on the opening months of the campaign, as well as the Battle of Brandywine, refer to my first book on the Philadelphia Campaign, *Brandywine: A Military History of the Battle that Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2014).

Revolution had devolved into something more closely resembling a guerilla war than the more traditional European-style of combat. Washington described this form of war in a letter that February. “There have been and almost daily are, some small Skirmishes,” he explained, “but without much loss on either side.” Happily for Washington and the American cause, this form of warfare continued for the next four months, giving the general the precious time and space he needed to rebuild his weakened army. The stress built up during the extended off-tempo, low-intensity war simmered through the spring of 1777 until it boiled over into the savageness exhibited later in the campaign—especially at Paoli. The rains of April ended in early May and Washington, his army still in flux, shifted his command from the winter encampment at Morristown to a position at Middlebrook, New Jersey.³

General Howe mostly ignored Washington’s change of base and made little effort to open the 1777 campaign season. He intended to capture Philadelphia as rapidly as possible and return to New York to join forces with Gen. John Burgoyne and the northern army, yet he showed no sign of urgency to actually do so. Nicholas Cresswell, an Englishman soon to return to England, noted in his journal, “I am as ignorant of the Motions or designs of our Army as if I had been in Virginia.” The British soldiers, added Cresswell, “seem very healthy and long to be in action.”⁴

June 1777

William Howe finally lurched into action in June by ordering an expedition to Middlebush, New Jersey. The British commander decided his best bet was to attempt the overland route to Philadelphia in the hope of luring Washington down from his mountain stronghold. Defeating Washington in New Jersey and then marching to Philadelphia offered Howe the best chance to take the colonial capital and leave in time to aid Burgoyne in New York. Howe’s delay in opening the campaign triggered some dissatisfaction within the British officer corps. Timing was crucial to the British plan, and the army could have moved weeks earlier when

3 John D. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, 39 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1933), vol. 7, 196.

4 Nicholas Cresswell, *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, 1774-1777* (New York, 1928), 229.



the winter rains stopped and the warmer weather dried the roads. However, Howe did not move into northern New Jersey until June 13.⁵

To the disbelief of officers on both sides, the British army stopped after a march of about ten miles and established camp the day after reaching its destination. Not only did the army stop its advance, but Howe ordered fortifications erected; he apparently no longer intended to move any farther toward Philadelphia through New Jersey. “Nobody in the world could be more careful than he is,” wrote Howe’s Hessian aide, Capt. Levin Friedrich Ernst von Muenchhausen, in defense of his chief’s actions. “This is absolutely necessary in this cursed hilly country.” By remaining stationary, Howe intended to draw Washington down from the high ground and offer him battle in the relatively flat country east of the mountain range. To Howe’s dismay, Washington refused to take the bait.⁶

The failure to lure the Americans into a fight flummoxed Howe, whose army of professional soldiers was being stymied by Washington’s ragtag collection of militia, frontiersmen, and Continental Regulars. No one believed Washington’s force was formidable, including Washington himself. His was not the army of veterans that would become hardened and molded in the grueling campaign still ahead of them, followed by the reckoning that would take place at Valley Forge the following winter. Four days ticked past as Howe waited in frustration for Washington to move. Other than light skirmishing and the launching of small raiding parties to plunder the countryside, Howe accomplished nothing. By remaining idle during perfectly good weather, Howe had effectively removed his army from the war effort.

Howe gave up the game and returned to New Brunswick on June 19 as elements of the Continental Army followed, skirmishing fitfully with his rear guard. Howe’s actions dumbfounded British Maj. Charles Stuart. “These retrograde movements appear just as incomprehensible to us as they can possibly to you,” he wrote his father in England. Howe’s half-hearted attempt in New Jersey was as baffling then as it is today. Even though he was on a tight schedule, he moved thousands of troops ten miles, went into camp and constructed earthworks, waited

5 For a complete discussion of the campaign, its strategy, and the relationship between Howe and Burgoyne, see John F. Luzader, *Saratoga: A Military History of the Decisive Campaign of the American Revolution* (Savas Beatie, 2008).

6 Friedrich von Muenchhausen, *At General Howe’s Side: 1776-1778: The Diary of General William Howe’s aide de camp, Captain Friedrich von Muenchhausen*, trans. Ernst Kipping, ed. Samuel Steele Smith (Monmouth Beach, NJ, 1974), 16.

four days, and returned to his starting point a week later. Most historians attribute Howe's actions to a failed effort to pull Washington from the mountains for an open-field fight. However, Washington had never so obliged his enemy, and in fact rarely fought a battle under his enemy's terms. The more logical explanation is that Howe never intended to assault Philadelphia by marching through New Jersey. He would reach his objective by using the British fleet to transport his army.⁷

On June 22, Howe retired farther to Amboy, New Jersey, to load his army and its baggage for the voyage to the Delaware River. The Americans pressed Howe's rear guard, harassing the tail of his column. Washington remained cautiously optimistic about the state of affairs. "I cannot say that the move I am about to make towards Amboy accords altogether with my opinion," wrote the army commander, "not that I am under any other apprehension than that of being obliged to loose Ground again, which would indeed be no small misfortune as the Spirits of our Troops, and the Country, is greatly reviv'd (and I presume) the Enemys not a little depress'd, by their late retrograde motions."⁸

Washington's willingness to come down off the high ground and pursue Howe's retreating army, however, provided the British general with the opportunity he had been seeking. The Continental Army was on more engageable terrain, and Howe had his chance to attack. He did just that on June 25 by turning and assaulting Maj. Gen. Lord Stirling's isolated and heavily outnumbered American division of some 2,500 men. Stirling waged a well-crafted fighting withdrawal and took up a strong defensive position in the area of Ash Swamp and Scotch Plains. The British pushed hard and forced Stirling's command back once more toward Westfield. Suffering under an intense sun, Howe called off the pursuit and the day's fighting ended. The defensive action cost Stirling perhaps as many as 100 killed and wounded, in addition to 70 men and three cannons captured, while British losses totaled just five killed and 30 wounded. "The Battle of Short Hills," as it became known, bought precious time for Washington to move the balance of his army into the hill country to deny Howe the opportunity of the larger pitched battle he so craved. The affair also demonstrated that Washington's vaunted spy network had been surprised and thus had failed him. The British army, camped a mere eight miles away, had stolen a march on Washington and defeated a portion of the Continental Army. Howe had been unable to bring Washington to battle, but his

7 Mrs. E. Stuart Wortley, ed. *A Prime Minister and His Son: From the Correspondence of the Third Earl of Bute and Lt. General The Honourable Sir Charles Stuart*, K.B. (London, 1925), 110-113.

8 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 8, 295-296.

short-lived romp across the Jersey countryside had made one thing clear: the large and often lumbering British army could move about the countryside, plundering as it went, and there was little Washington could or would do about it.⁹

By June 28 Howe was back in Amboy, his attempt to defeat Washington in northern New Jersey at an end. Washington fully expected Howe to use the British fleet to change the field of operations—but where would the ships carry his army? “By means of their Shipping and the easy transportation that Shipping affords, they have it much in their power to lead us [in] a very disagreeable dance,” Washington wrote in a letter to his brother, John Augustine Washington.¹⁰

On the last day of June, Howe removed the last of his troops from New Jersey and returned to Staten Island, New York. He and his command were back where they had started before their attack on New York City nearly a year earlier. The city and its environs, together with Newport, Rhode Island, remained under British control, but Howe’s withdrawal allowed Washington and his Continental Army to assume complete control of New Jersey. The strategic situation disgusted Loyalist Nicholas Cresswell: “General Howe, a man brought up to War from his youth, to be puzzled and plagued for two years together, with a Virginia Tobacco planter. O! Britain, how thy Laurels tarnish in the hands of such a Lubber!”¹¹

While Howe pondered his next move, Washington redeployed his command, shifting three brigades into the Hudson River Valley in case Howe headed in that direction. “Their Fleet,” he explained in a letter to Congress, “give them the most signal advantages, and opportunity of practicing a thousand feints.”¹²

July 1777

Early July found most of the Continental Army back in the mountains around Morristown. The position provided Washington with the option of shifting north to block the Hudson River, or south to protect the capital. The next move was up to Howe. Determined to use his fleet to reach Philadelphia, on July 8 the British general began the arduous process of loading his army onto transport ships. Howe believed he could ascend the Delaware River, capture Philadelphia, and still aid

9 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 8, 315.

10 Ibid.

11 Cresswell, *Journal*, 252.

12 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 8, 329-331.

Burgoyne in a timely fashion. He also believed that moving by sea would freeze the Americans in place until Washington realized where Howe was going. On the second point, he was correct.

By the time Howe finished the loading process on July 9, he had filled some 260 ships with 20,000 soldiers, support personnel, artillery, horses, and everything else he needed to launch a major campaign. Rather than depart immediately, however, Howe left his men and animals bobbing in the harbor for several days, confined in tight overheated quarters aboard stuffy transports. “God knows whether we shall go south or north,” wrote a perplexed Col. Carl von Donop, the commander of the Hessian grenadiers, “but the heat which is beginning to make itself felt with the approach of the dog-days makes one wish that the general would choose north rather than south.” The delay also confused Howe’s Hessian aide, Capt. Friedrich von Muenchhausen, who observed, “No one seems to be able to figure out why we are waiting here so long, considering the fact that everyone, except Howe and a few officers, are aboard ship.”¹³

Washington, aware Howe was loading ships for a campaign, decided to get a jump on him by moving the army north on July 12 to the New Jersey-New York border in anticipation of a push up the Hudson River. Leaving New Jersey wide open for Howe to make an overland forced march for Philadelphia was a bold and risky decision that Howe failed to recognize or exploit. The deliberate British general was finally ready to move on July 20. He ordered the large British armada to sail out of New York Harbor, leaving behind Gen. Henry Clinton and the city’s garrison of 7,400 troops. American observers along the New Jersey coast speculated that the fleet was turning south, but at this point Howe’s target was still an open question. The lack of a Continental Navy hampered Washington, who was forced to rely upon spotters scattered along the coastline to locate the ships and relay information. Until reliable intelligence arrived, Washington had no choice but to mark time in northern New Jersey.

Howe’s voyage promised to be long and slow, for the prevailing summer winds along the Atlantic coast tend to blow north—and Howe was heading south. The

13 Carl von Donop, “Letters from a Hessian Mercenary (Colonel von Donop to the Prince of Prussia),” ed. Hans Huth, in *PMHB* (Philadelphia, 1938), vol. 62, 498; Von Muenchhausen, *At Howe’s Side*, 21. Thirty-seven-year-old Carl von Donop was the son of one of the great noble families of Hesse-Cassel. He served during the Seven Years’ War and when the Revolution began, was the personal adjutant of the Landgraf of Hesse-Cassel. He would take command of the Jaeger Corps in 1776. His men fought throughout the New York Campaign, and by the start of the Philadelphia Campaign, von Donop was in command of the Hessian grenadier brigade.

journey was a miserable experience for man and beast alike. The heat and humidity were stifling and brisk winds buffeted the ships. Frequent late afternoon thunderstorms added to the general misery of the voyage. The weather proved so uncooperative that it took the fleet a week to travel only 150 miles to Cape May, New Jersey. Washington, meanwhile, concentrated near Ramapo, New Jersey, a position from which he could either march to the Hudson Highlands or move rapidly to Philadelphia.

On July 26, shore-based spotters sighted a large portion of the British fleet heading south near Little Egg Harbor, New Jersey. Washington was beginning to hedge his bets and had been slowly moving south, inching toward Morristown with four of the army's five divisions. The Continental Army headed for three separate crossings of the Delaware River to expedite its passage into Pennsylvania, if warranted. When news of the fleet found its way to Washington, there was little doubt Howe was heading for Philadelphia. On July 28 the leading elements of Washington's legions reached the Delaware.

The final days of July saw the British fleet tacking into the Delaware Bay to assess current conditions and intelligence about Washington's army. When this news reached Washington about 24 hours later, he ordered the army to cross into Pennsylvania to block a move against Philadelphia. Almost simultaneously, the Howe brothers made what was perhaps the most critical decision of 1777 aboard bobbing ships in Delaware Bay.

The British general and admiral acted upon incorrect information that Washington's entire army was across the Delaware and approaching Wilmington, Delaware. They were also told that fortifications had been constructed along the shores of the Delaware and various obstructions had been placed in the river to halt the fleet. The "news" should have elated the British high command. The river defenses and a small naval militia were of trifling concern when the most important city in North America was essentially undefended. The Schuylkill and Brandywine rivers that stood between the army and the colonial capital would have to be crossed, but they could be forded at numerous locations. Although William Howe was informed that Washington's army was west of the Delaware River, little if any of the Continental Army had yet to arrive in Philadelphia. The British had a clear and open path to the American capital.¹⁴

14 At 10:00 a.m. on July 30, Capt. Andrew Hamond reported to Admiral Howe's flagship HMS *Eagle* to meet with the Howe brothers. Hamond was shocked to find the general still asleep. A short time later the two Howes and Hamond met in the admiral's cabin. One of the first questions posed

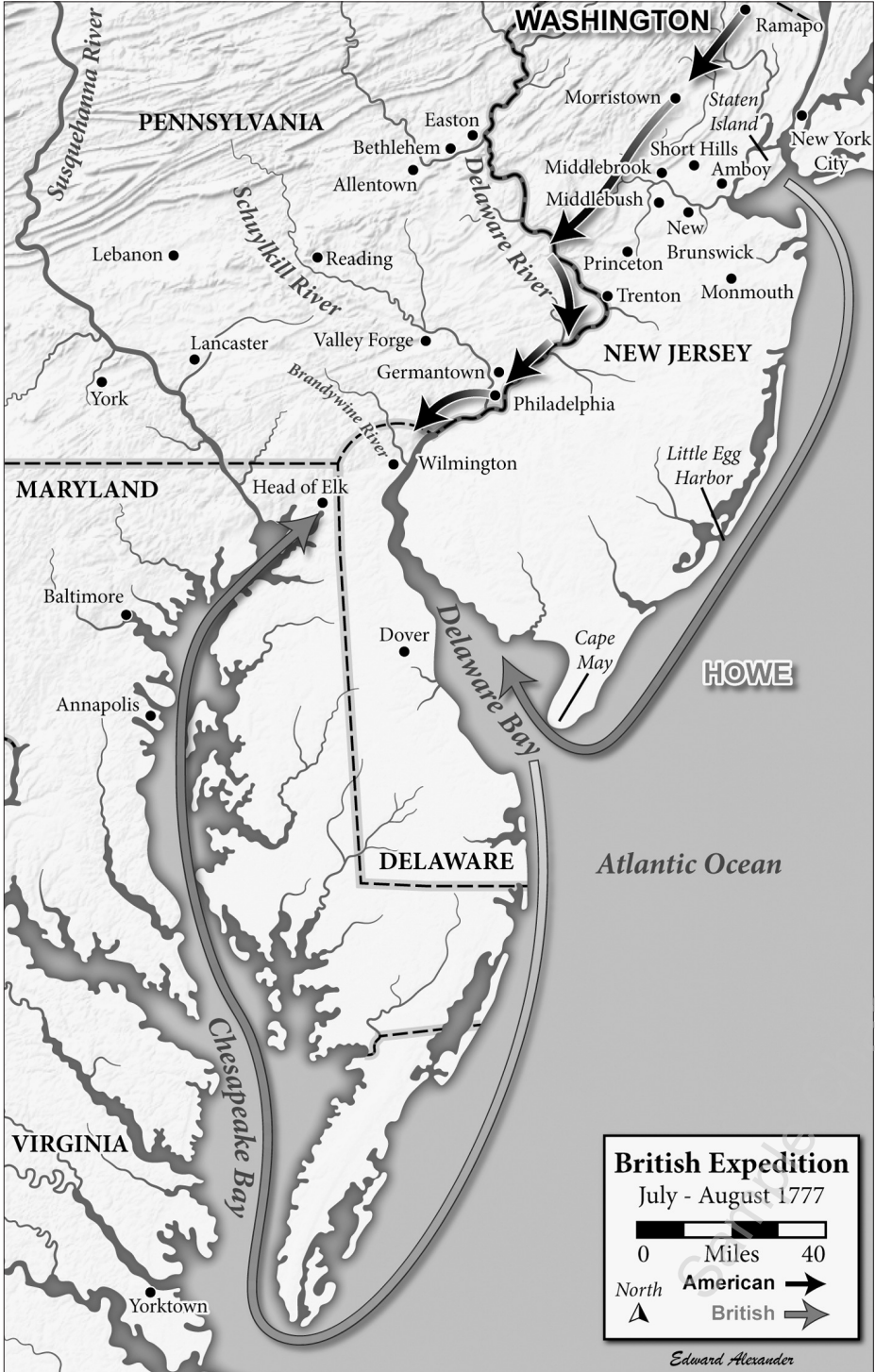
Despite easy access to Philadelphia, which was approximately 90 miles away by ship, Howe decided to sail south to Chesapeake Bay, where he could put his troops “ashore without molestation, have time to recover the Horses after the fatigue of the Voyage before they entered Service, and where the Transports could remain in perfect security.” The move, he also stressed, would threaten backcountry settlements. On July 31, the fleet headed back to sea. Howe later claimed the shift farther south benefited John Burgoyne by drawing Washington away from the Hudson River Valley. In reality, the moment William Howe gave the order to steer toward the Chesapeake, he eliminated any possibility of aiding Burgoyne.¹⁵

The sailing of the British fleet removed the immediate threat to Philadelphia, but it did not stop panic from erupting inside the capital. City officials ordered that all wagons be detained for the removal of anything that might aid the enemy. Congress passed a resolution recommending “to make prisoners such of the late crown & proprietary officers and other persons in and near this city as are disaffected or may be dangerous to the publick liberty and send them back into the country, there to be confined or enlarged upon parole as their characters & behavior may require.” Two of the most prominent arrestees included Gov. John Penn, grandson of founder William Penn, and Chief Justice Benjamin Chew, a prominent Philadelphia lawyer and owner of a large stone home in the village of Germantown.¹⁶

was whether Hamond knew Washington's location. The army, he replied, was across the Delaware heading for Wilmington. His intelligence source is not known, but Hamond's assessment was incorrect. Perhaps one brigade was across the river, but the rest of Washington's army was strung out across northern New Jersey. Howe's most recent dispatch to Germain, however, stated that he would ascend the Delaware River only if Washington remained in northern New Jersey. If Washington entered Pennsylvania instead, Howe was going to revert to the plan to ascend Chesapeake Bay. Hamond's incorrect report made Howe's decision for him. Harris, *Brandywine*, 83-84. At the time there were unfinished earthworks at Billingsport and Red Bank, New Jersey. On the Pennsylvania side could be found incomplete redoubts on Bush Island and on Darby Creek. Fort Mifflin, on Mud Island, was virtually unmanned.

15 Denys Hay, “The Denouement of General Howe's Campaign of 1777,” in *English Historical Review*, vol. 74 (1964), 504.

16 Samuel Hazard, ed., *Pennsylvania Archives: Selected and Arranged from Original Documents in the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth*, Series 1, 12 vols. (Philadelphia, 1853), vol. 5, 469.



August 1777

By the beginning of August, the British fleet was moving south along the Delaware coast. The move left Washington with a conundrum. Was Howe making for the Hudson River or was his objective one of the port cities farther south? Washington concentrated his command just north of Philadelphia, with four of his divisions camped in and around the village of Germantown on the outskirts of the city. The British strategy also perplexed members of Congress, including John Adams. “What this Man [Howe] is after,” he wrote, “no Wisdom can discover.”¹⁷

By August 10, Washington had shifted the army to the banks of Neshaminy Creek, north of Philadelphia and closer to the Delaware River, in case he needed to rush back to the Hudson Highlands. There was little more he could do until definitive intelligence arrived confirming the location of Howe’s fleet. Washington may well have smiled had he known that the fleet had reached the entrance to Chesapeake Bay after suffering through terrible storms. Fresh food and water had run out on many transports, and horses were dying by the score and being tossed overboard. When news of Howe’s location, if not his army’s condition, arrived on August 21, Washington scrambled to move the scattered elements of his army into a position to confront the British south of Philadelphia. Washington started inching towards northern Delaware to block Howe.

With the British fleet anchored near the mouth of the Elk River in the upper reaches of Chesapeake Bay, Washington shifted the Continental Army back into the Germantown area. Howe was going for Philadelphia and would approach from the southwest. The terrain there was cut with several creeks and rivers that would slow, but not stop, Howe’s access to the city, including the Red and White Clay creeks, the Brandywine, and the Schuylkill. Washington also was concerned that Howe would march into the interior and threaten the major American supply depots at Lancaster or Reading. There was no real choice: he would have to advance toward Howe.

On August 24, Washington paraded his troops from their Germantown camps through Philadelphia en route to Delaware. It was time to block Howe’s approaches to Philadelphia. The next morning, Washington crossed into Delaware with two divisions and camped along Naaman’s Creek. About the same time, Howe began offloading troops into northeastern Maryland. Other than some local militia that Howe brushed aside, his landing was unmolested.

17 Paul H. Smith, et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 26 vols. (Washington, 1981), vol. 7, 403.

Now that Howe had landed, making a connection with the Delaware River was imperative. Throughout the war the British were in short supply of land transportation. Howe's logistical concerns were compounded by the fact that many of his horses had died during the voyage. It was vitally important for British armies to operate in the field near navigable rivers so the Royal Navy could resupply them. In fact, points out one recent historian, "The insecurity of overland communications restricted an army's maximum operational range to about fifteen to twenty miles from navigable water." This operational conundrum affected Howe's decision-making throughout the campaign. Had he landed in northern Delaware at the end of July, he would have had his connection with the Delaware River. Now, Howe was barely back on land and he had no choice but to operate along the Delaware River—ignoring the reason he initially provided for delaying the campaign for another month by shifting his army farther south.¹⁸

On August 28, the British advanced from their landing site, brushing aside American militia and plundering the countryside. The initial move overran the commercial trading village at Head of Elk, Maryland. By August 31, Howe was devastating the countryside in northeastern Maryland in search of badly needed supplies, including reinforcements and fresh horses. Contrary to Howe's belief, Loyalists had little interest in flocking to his standard. "The prevailing disposition of the inhabitants, who, I am sorry to observe, seem[s] to be, excepting a few individuals, strongly in enmity against us," Howe complained to Lord Germain. "[M]any having taken up arms, and, by far the greater number, deserted their dwellings, driving off, at the same time, their stock of cattle and horses." Howe later claimed that the real reason he could not support Burgoyne's army was the failure to recruit Loyalist support. Excuses for abandoning Burgoyne were growing larger with each telling.¹⁹

Three factors worked against British recruitment efforts. First, Loyalists in the region were conservative, cautious, and against violence. Because of this, Quakers were viewed as Loyalists. Second, the British Army treated Loyalists poorly. Rather than grant British Army commissions and the permanence that came with them, they gave Loyalists temporary provincial commissions. Even though these people remained loyal to King George III, the British viewed them as inferior second-class citizens, and provincial units were often relegated to non-combat roles like wagon

18 Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and With Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman, OK, 2008), 35.

19 Stockdale, ed., *Register*, vol. 10, 418.

guards and garrison duty. Finally, Loyalists who came forward when the British occupied a region were often abandoned when the invaders eventually left—leaving them open to abuse by rebel forces.

By late August Washington, who had gathered an army outside Wilmington, nearly equal in size to Howe's, was fully aware of the British supply problems, especially their dire lack of healthy horses. "All accounts agree that [the enemy] are very much distressed for want of horses, numbers of which it is said died on the passage, and the rest are in exceeding bad order," wrote the American commander. "[T]his will probably occasion some delay and give time for the militia, who seem to be collecting pretty fast, to join us." Unfortunately for Washington, the British equine shortage prompted Howe to offer high prices for mounts, and many American dragoons deserted to collect the inducement.²⁰

September 1777

By the beginning of September, Howe's soldiers were itching for action. They had spent several weeks cooped up on ships and the last several days conducting a fitful and frustrating advance into northeastern Maryland. Howe was as ready as he would ever be to risk a battle. He had been avoiding a pitched confrontation, but the campaign season was rapidly winding down and there was precious little to show for it.

Washington had an outpost in northern Delaware at Cooch's Bridge on the Christiana River, which Howe would have to deal with in order to reach the main colonial army. He did just that on September 3, sending 450 jaegers and 1,300 light infantrymen on a series of flanking movements against 1,000 Americans under William Maxwell. The fighting lasted some seven hours before Maxwell's men ran out of ammunition and fled across the bridge and eventually back toward Wilmington, leaving the British in command of the banks of the Christiana River. The battle, which carried Howe one step closer to Philadelphia, was the largest land engagement in the history of Delaware. Once he achieved this success, however, Howe settled down for another five days to pillage the countryside. Feeding his army was imperative; providing for it in a hostile land was a constant problem.

Following Cooch's Bridge, Washington convinced himself that Howe would take the main road into Wilmington. He deployed his army behind the Red Clay

20 Philander D. Chase & Edward G. Lengel, eds., *The Papers of George Washington*, 25 vols. (Charlottesville & London, 2001), vol. 11, 112.

Creek with a defense in depth. Since Howe never resorted to frontal assaults, Washington's thinking is a mystery. At Long Island, White Plains, Short Hills, and Cooch's Bridge, Howe utilized flanking movements to avoid a bloody attack. Given his history, Howe's next move was predictable. On September 8, he resorted to what he did best, and gained the Pennsylvania border ahead of Washington. By late morning, the bulk of Howe's army was camped on the hills around Hockessin, Delaware, well above Washington's right flank.²¹

Outgeneraled yet again, Washington scrambled to get his army in motion and into a blocking position to protect Philadelphia. After months of confusion and outright misery, Howe's latest moves impressed his officers and men alike. "All marched in one column, and to our great surprise," wrote Howe's aide von Muenchhausen, "instead of taking the road by way of Christiana Bridge to Wilmington as expected, we went to our left by way of White Clay Creek and Newark. . . . [E]veryone is pleased with the good march and the fact that it was kept a secret, thus cutting off Washington from Lancaster." In the middle of the night, Washington pulled the Continental Army from northern Delaware, marched north, and by the next day began moving into positions on the east side of the Brandywine River near Chads's Ford in Pennsylvania.²²

Between the evening of September 9 and the morning of September 10, Howe's army moved north parallel to Washington's position and camped at Kennett Square, about six miles west of the American army. Washington had spent the long summer months attempting to hinder British movements with militia and other troops while seeking a favorable opportunity to make a stand should one become necessary. The terrain along the Brandywine River provided him with exactly that.²³

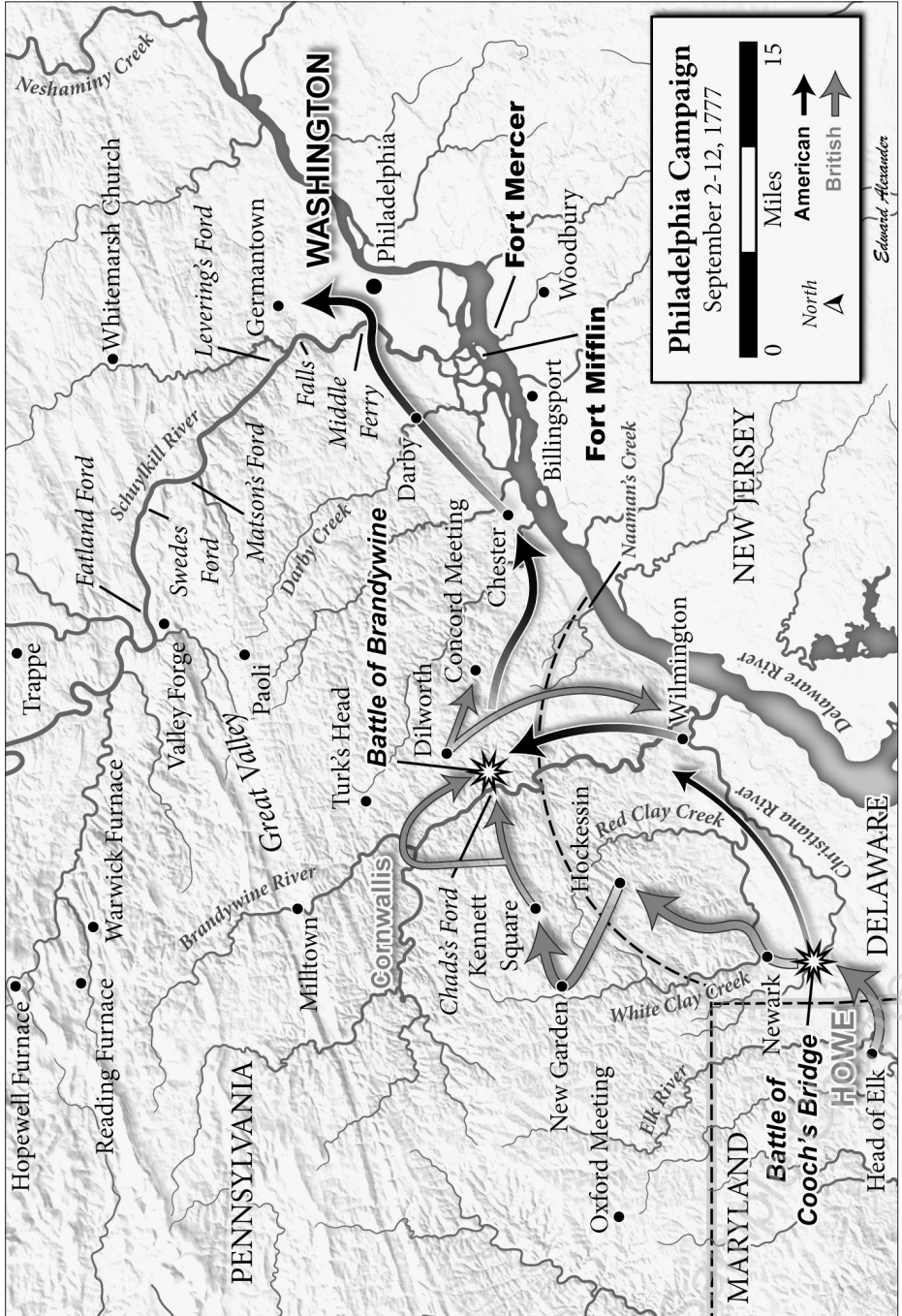
The Battle of Brandywine

The Battle of Brandywine was the longest and largest single-day engagement of the war. The fighting on September 11, 1777, is also a study of contradictions. George Washington hoped a stout defense along the rolling terrain hugging the Brandywine River would bar British access to Philadelphia. His goal was to defend

21 Harris, *Brandywine*, 140-145.

22 Von Muenchhausen, *At Howe's Side*, 30.

23 Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington: A Military Life* (New York, 2005), 223.



its various crossings and prevent Howe from gaining access to the east bank. Although Washington had his troops in position east of the Brandywine a full day before the fighting began, he failed to gather all the intelligence needed to execute his defensive battle plan. He intended to use the river to block Howe's advance, yet remained almost completely ignorant of the surrounding terrain and road network, and failed to identify and guard all the fords available to the British. There was a lack of reconnaissance patrols. Even more alarming was that no one in a position of authority thought to speak to the many local residents serving in the Continental Army. The result, argued one writer, was an "American army even more uncertain of the immediate nature of the country than were the British." Washington did not know the region, and did not take the "precaution of having at hand someone who knew the countryside."²⁴

Earlier in the war, Washington reasoned that "we should on all Occassions avoid a general Action, or put anything to the Risque, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn." By early September 1777, Washington's Continental Army had been maneuvered into a position that warranted and necessitated a pitched battle. Giving up Philadelphia without a fight was not an option.²⁵

While Washington prepared for battle with little terrain knowledge and even less help from the locals, William Howe made his plans with the advantage of both. Pennsylvania Loyalist Joseph Galloway and others provided Howe with everything he needed to know about local terrain conditions and the road network. Washington's position east of the Brandywine limited Howe's options. A frontal assault against the American positions would be too costly and the men hard to replace. Howe, who strove to avoid direct assaults, preferred sending a diversionary force forward against the center of an enemy's main position to pin him in place, and a strong column on a flanking march to turn the enemy out of his position.

Howe had used this same tactic repeatedly, and recently, against Washington, but the Virginian had not yet taken the lesson to heart and was consistently unprepared for Howe's predictable maneuver. Brandywine was merely a repeat of Howe's performance on other fields. He sent Wilhelm von Knyphausen's division ahead to pin Washington in place, then executed a wide left hook under the command of Gen. Cornwallis that surprised the Americans by appearing beyond

24 Reed, *Campaign*, 114; Pancake, *1777*, 169.

25 Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings*, vol. 6, 28.

their vulnerable right flank. Washington discovered the move too late to prevent it—a glaring failure of intelligence gathering. To his credit, he shifted the bulk of his army to oppose it and conducted a dogged defensive action that cost Howe dearly. Howe's success that day can be evenly credited to both his good generalship and to Washington's failures.²⁶

Although the Continental Army had suffered a tactical defeat along the Brandywine, Washington's men fought remarkably well. William Maxwell's light infantry brigade conducted the morning's delaying action in splendid fashion, and the divisions of Adam Stephen, Lord Stirling, and John Sullivan found good defensive ground and fought hard upon it when ordered to confront Howe's flanking column. They were ultimately defeated through no fault of their own. Nathanael Greene's men turned in a solid performance and kept the roads open for the American retreat. They suffered some 1,300 casualties, with 300 killed, 600 wounded, and 400 missing or captured. Given the trying circumstances, the Continentals had done their job as well or better than anyone could have reasonably expected. Washington's poor use of scouts and the intelligence they produced haunted him throughout that long day.²⁷

Howe, on the other hand, gathered accurate information about local terrain conditions despite operating in hostile territory. His flanking maneuver, which was based on that intelligence, worked almost to perfection. His veteran British and Hessian troops performed well and did all that was asked of them. Knyphausen's division played its diversionary role exceedingly well, deceiving Washington through most of the day as to Howe's true intentions. Cornwallis's division executed a grueling flank march, deployed, and broke the American lines in a frontal assault. British losses approached 600, with 93 killed and nearly 500 wounded. Fortunately for the Americans, Howe was hampered by a lack of mounted troops, which prevented him from pursuing his defeated enemy.²⁸

Though they lost the battle, many Americans found reasons for optimism. "Notwithstanding we gave the Enemy the ground, the purchase has been at much blood," explained Gen. Nathanael Greene, "this being by far the greatest loss they have met with since the commencement of the War." Gen. George Weedon, one of Greene's brigade commanders, agreed. "Fake Intelligence saved his [Howe's]

26 For a full discussion of the battle and its results see Harris, *Brandywine*, 202-404.

27 *Ibid.*, 368.

28 *Ibid.*

Bacon that day, or in all probability America would have had just cause to adore the name of Brandywine to the latest posterity.”²⁹ Continental artillery chief Henry Knox concurred, writing to his wife, “Our people behaved well but Heaven frowned upon us is a degree. We were obliged to retire after a very considerable slaughter of the enemy.” Washington knew serious mistakes had been made, though he was not yet ready to admit that he had been the one who had made them. “Unfortunately the intelligence received of the enemy’s advancing up the Brandywine, and crossing at a ford about six miles above us, was uncertain and contradictory,” he reported immediately after the battle, “notwithstanding all my pains to get the best.”³⁰

Many British and Hessian officers channeled these thoughts and heaped praise on the Continental Army. “As far as I can tell,” admitted Howe’s Hessian aide, Capt. von Muenchhausen, “Washington executed a masterpiece of strategy today by sending columns from his right to his left wing in the beginning... Soon after this Washington withdrew from his left wing... All this was done with great speed and especially good order.” Rather than praise his enemy Cornwallis applauded Howe by writing, “The manoeuvre that brought on the action of Brandywine certainly reflects the highest honour on the General [Howe].” Hessian Capt. Johann Ewald was pleased by the victory but realized the British had missed a rare opportunity. “Had General Howe set out two hours earlier, or marched faster Washington’s army would have been caught between two fires . . . several good friends from headquarters assured me that this mistake was caused by the guides, who had declared the route shorter than we found it to be.” The frustrated von Muenchhausen summarized that Washington’s escape that night happened because the patriots “could not be pursued by us because of the darkness, and . . . his still fresh men, who knew the terrain very well, could have the same advantage they would have in daylight.”³¹

29 Richard K. Showman, Robert M. McCarthy, and Margaret Cobb, eds., *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 13 vols. (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980), vol. 2, *1 January 1777-16 October 1778*, 162; Letter, George Weedon to John Page, 8 October 1777, original in Weedon Letters, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, IL. Weedon was a native Virginian, a veteran of the French and Indian War, and an innkeeper in Fredericksburg before the war.

30 Harry M. Ward, *Major General Adam Stephen and the Cause of American Liberty* (Charlottesville, VA, 1989), 197. Brooks, *Henry Knox*, 104. Fitzpatrick, ed., *Writings*, vol. 9, 207-8.

31 Von Muenchhausen, *At Howe’s Side*, 31-2; *Narrative of Howe*, 95-96. Von Muenchhausen’s description reverses Washington’s right and left wings; Johann Ewald, *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal: Captain Johann Ewald*, ed. and trans. Joseph P. Tustin (New Haven, CT, 1979), 87.

Washington's retreat from the Brandywine didn't end the fighting for Philadelphia, but it was the seminal engagement of the 1777 Philadelphia Campaign. The next several weeks would witness several small skirmishes and other encounters, including the Battle of Germantown, Washington's bold attempt to recapture the lost capital city.

Brandywine's Aftermath

Late on the evening of September 11, Washington and his army were retreating in haste from the battlefield at Brandywine toward Chester, Pennsylvania, reaching the port town along the Delaware River about midnight. While some of the troops had arrived ahead of the commander-in-chief, much of the army was strung out on several roads and paths stretching all the way back to the battlefield, about 14 miles to the northwest. The exhausted Washington desperately needed a few hours of rest, but took several minutes to pen a quick report to John Hancock, the president of the Congress. "I am sorry to inform you," he began, "that in this day's engagement, we have been obliged to leave the enemy masters of the field." After blaming faulty intelligence, Washington concluded on an optimistic note: "[O]ur loss of men is not, I am persuaded, very considerable, I believe much less than the enemy's."³²

The general civilian population of Chester County spent the next several days dealing with the repercussions of the battle while the politicians in Philadelphia debated whether the defeat meant that the capital was lost. Washington, who needed to reorganize his army, was pleased when early reports demonstrated that nearly 11,000 troops were again present for duty just a few days after Brandywine. This was just 1,000 fewer Continentals than he had taken into battle. Not surprisingly, few of the 3,000 militiamen present at Brandywine reappeared within the army's ranks. More time was needed to gather the Pennsylvania militia and get them back into the fold.³³

Thus far in the campaign, the militia from Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania had not earned much respect from the Continentals. The militias had done precious little to interfere with Howe's plunderous march through northeastern Maryland and northern Delaware. The sizable division of

32 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 9, 207-208.

33 Harris, *Brandywine*, 374.

Pennsylvania militia that had joined the army along the Brandywine had been wisely relegated to a minor role in the battle because Washington knew he could not rely on them when most needed. John Armstrong, who commanded the Pennsylvania militia at Brandywine, agreed with this assessment. “[M]any, too many” of the militia were a “Scandle to the military profession, a nuisance in service & a dead weight on the publick,” he declared. Still, Armstrong did not think it fair to compare the militia with the Continental Line, and he also believed the part-time soldiers had many men in the ranks who would stand and fight. Many judged the militia “from a single action, [and] still worse . . . brand the whole with the infamous conduct of only a part.”³⁴

Gen. Howe did little to interfere with Washington’s efforts to regroup in the immediate aftermath of the battle. For four days, Howe kept most of his army on the battlefield instead of launching a vigorous pursuit. In truth, Howe’s army was exhausted. The soldiers had endured a long tedious voyage, followed by hard marching and prolonged combat with sustained casualties. They were in no condition to drive ahead, and had earned a much-needed rest. “The fatigues of this Day were excessive,” confirmed Lt. Loftus Cliffe of the 46th Regiment of Foot. “If you knew the weight a poor soldier carried, the length of time he is obliged to be on foot for a train of Artillery to move 17 Miles, the Duties he goes thro when near an Enemy & that the whole night of the 9th we were marching, you would say we had done our duty on the 11th.” While men on both sides claimed the Americans had dealt Howe a severe blow, Capt. Richard Fitzpatrick of the British Brigade of Guards thought such talk was without foundation. “Some foolish people were much elated with this event [Brandywine] and an insufferable torrent of nonsense was talked for some time afterwards, such as that the whole army must disperse, that it was impossible they should ever recover [from] so severe a blow, &c &c but these silly fellows were soon convinced that they had no foundation for their opinions, Washington still continued to talk high language.”³⁵

Besides resting his army, Howe had other matters to handle. Hundreds of wounded men needed medical care, and the dead had to be buried. The army needed to establish a bridgehead at Wilmington, to evacuate the injured, the

34 Hazard, et al, eds., *Archives*, Series 1, vol. 6, 100-101.

35 Letter, Loftus Cliffe to brother Jack, October 24, 1777, Loftus Cliffe Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Letter, Richard Fitzpatrick to his Brother, the Earl of Upper Ossory, October 28, 1777, Richard Fitzpatrick Papers, Miscellaneous Manuscripts 622, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

seriously ill, and the collected provisions to a safe garrison town. Insufficient wagons and the paucity of healthy horses hampered Howe's operational ability, and it took several days to accomplish these tasks.³⁶

With the dawn of September 12 came an order from Washington for the army to move out, while also doing everything possible to round up stragglers and put them back in the ranks. "The commanding officer of each brigade," he ordered, "is immediately to send off as many officers as he shall think necessary on the roads leading to the places of action yesterday, and on any other roads where stragglers may be found; particularly to Wilmington, where 'tis said, many have retired, to pick up all the stragglers from the army, and bring them on. In doing this, they will proceed as far, towards the enemy, as shall be consistent with their own safety, and examine every house."

Washington also had to carefully assess his losses and the army's fighting condition:

[Each] Brigadier, or officer commanding a brigade will immediately make the most exact returns of their killed, wounded and missing. The officers are, without loss of time to see that their men are completed with ammunition; that their arms are in the best order, the inside of them washed clean and well dried; the touch-holes picked, and a good flint in each gun. . . . The commanding officer of each regiment is to endeavour to procure such necessaries as are wanting, for his men.³⁷

With his own army back in organized motion, Washington needed to find fresh defensive ground to protect Philadelphia from Howe's victorious army. The only remaining natural barrier was the Schuylkill River. The Continentals left Chester, marched through Darby, crossed the floating bridge at the Middle Ferry on the Schuylkill (modern-day Market Street Bridge), and entered the outskirts of Philadelphia. The bridge, explained one modern historian, "an unstable affair, was fashioned of pontoons roughly laid over with planking." The Pennsylvania militia was left on the near side of the river to help screen the army, which bypassed the capital by turning left and marching out to East Falls, about five miles from the crossing near Germantown. The long and exhausting march consumed 19 miles.

36 Spring, *With Zeal*, 269.

37 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 9, 209-210.

Washington made his headquarters in the home of Henry Hill on the outskirts of Germantown.³⁸

While passing through Darby, Washington sent a letter to Brig. Gen. William Smallwood. The brigadier had been detached from the army to help raise militia in his native Maryland and was organizing them around Oxford Meeting in southern Chester County. “[The] forces under your command,” began Washington, “cannot be employed to so much advantage in any way, as by falling on the Enemy’s Rear and attacking them as often as possible. I am persuaded many advantages will result from this measure.” Such a tactic, he continued, “will greatly retard their march and give us time, and will also oblige them, either to keep a string guard with their Sick and Wounded, with which they must now be much incumbered, or to send them back to their Shipping under an escort, which you will have an opportunity of attacking with a good prospect of Success.” The Virginia general had fought a traditional battle along the Brandywine; now it was time to return to a strategy of harassment.³⁹

Moving the army north of the Schuylkill River put Washington behind the last natural barrier between the British and Philadelphia. The river was swift-flowing but shallow in many spots. The Falls of the Schuylkill (near modern East Falls), or rapids, splashed through large boulders where the river dropped some 30 feet. Except for the floating bridge Washington’s army used to cross, there were no permanent bridges spanning the river. Philadelphia was accessible at the Upper, Middle, and Lower ferries, and many fords farther upriver. As a defensive barrier, the Schuylkill was less than ideal.⁴⁰

If defending the numerous fords across the Brandywine had been difficult for Washington, then defending those crossing the Schuylkill, which were more spread out, would prove a Herculean task. Most of the fords were winding, narrow affairs that snaked across a gravelly river bottom, dependent upon small islands or mud

38 Thomas J. McGuire, *The Philadelphia Campaign: Brandywine and the Fall of Philadelphia*, 2 vols. (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2006), vol. 1, 273. The Hill House was located at the intersection of Midvale Avenue and Stokeley Street in the East Falls section of Philadelphia.

39 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 9, 210.

40 The rapids no longer exist because dams were built that raised the water level. The Lower Ferry, also known as Gray’s Ferry, was located where Gray’s Ferry Avenue Bridge crosses the river today, between south Philadelphia and southwest Philadelphia. The Middle Ferry was located between the modern Market Street and Chestnut Street Bridges, near 30th Street. The Upper Ferry was located within the bounds of modern-day Fairmount Park, near the Philadelphia Art Museum and the Spring Garden Street Bridge.

flats to complete the crossing. Hilly terrain lined the Schuylkill along much of its course, and many of the ford roads meandered down steep inclines. Any force crossing the river at such places as Fatland and Levering's fords would find itself vulnerable to attack. The hills around Swedes Ford tapered more gently to the crossing in a wide and shallow valley, to a point where the river bottom was hard and stony. A body of troops had more room to maneuver and protect itself there. Somehow Washington would have to protect every ford and potential crossing point if he was going to defend the Schuylkill River line.⁴¹

Moving into the Germantown area left Washington with a vexing conundrum. The Delaware and Schuylkill rivers form a peninsula, at the tip of which sat Philadelphia. Washington felt duty-bound to defend the capital, but he could not leave the critical supply depots at Reading and other places in the backcountry unprotected. Moving northwest to cover the depots would expose Philadelphia. Moving into position to defend Philadelphia exposed the supply centers upon which his army depended. It was now readily obvious that the loss at Brandywine made protecting the American capital nearly impossible. The security of his storehouses had to take precedence over that of the most important city in North America.⁴²

Some panic set in once the residents of Philadelphia realized Washington had reached that conclusion. Many had already fled or were soon to do so. Those who remained prepared for the worst or rejoiced in secret because they backed the British cause. "Numbers of the Inhabitants are removing from the City, but the Confusion and Tumult, is much less than I could have supposed, considering the very Critical Situation of Affairs," explained James Hutchinson, a surgeon in the city.⁴³

Earlier in the campaign, several prominent Quakers had been imprisoned under suspicion of aiding the British and were housed in the city's Masonic Lodge. While they never filed formal charges, Congress and the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council decided to release the Quakers and banish them from

41 McGuire, *Campaign*, vol. 1, 274. Levering's Ford is in modern-day Manayunk, just below the big concrete arch bridge for Green Lane. The ford took its name from the Levering family which lived nearby. Matson's Ford is in modern-day Conshohocken, just north of the Fayette Street Bridge. Fatland Ford is in modern-day Valley Forge National Historic Park, behind where the chapel stands today. Swedes Ford is in what is today Norristown, just below the Route 202 bridge.

42 Pancake, 1777, 174.

43 Letter, James Hutchinson to James Pemberton, 15 September 1777, James Hutchinson Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

Philadelphia. “We have been obliged to attempt to humble the Pride of some Jesuits who call themselves Quakers, but who love Money and Land better than Liberty or Religion,” wrote hawkish Congressman John Adams to his wife Abigail. “The Hypocrites are endeavouring to raise the Cry of Persecution, and to give this Matter a religious Turn, but they cant succeed. The World knows them and their Communications,” continued the future president. “American Independence had disappointed them, which makes them hate it. Yet the Dastards dare not avow their Hatred to it, it seems.” Reverend Henry Muhlenberg watched as “six wagons with guards passed by,” in Trappe, Pennsylvania, some 25 miles northeast of the capital. “[T]hey are to take the most prominent Quakers of Philadelphia, who have been arrested, to Augusta County, in Virginia.” The wagons and their human cargo eventually ended up in Winchester, Virginia.⁴⁴

While Washington wrestled with his options, and while most of Howe’s troops cleared the Brandywine battlefield and rested, elements of the British army probed ahead in search of the Americans. Gen. James Grant with the 1st and 2nd British Brigades, a squadron of dragoons, and the Queen’s Rangers led a scouting expedition east of the Brandywine on the day after the battle. Two miles east they reached Concord Meeting and rounded up American stragglers. Howe sent the 71st Highlanders and elements of the light dragoons south ten miles to Wilmington, Delaware, to secure the town, rendezvous with the fleet, and establish a hospital. The small body of militia defending the city fled when the Highlanders approached. Members of the 71st arrested John McKinley, the president of Delaware. According to McKinley, he remained behind because it was “more solicitous to perform my Duty, than for my own personal Safety.” The Highlanders also seized seven artillery pieces. With the port of Wilmington secured, Admiral Howe assured his brother the general “that he would have several ships at Wilmington on September 15th at the latest.”⁴⁵

44 Among those exiled from the city were Elizabeth Drinker’s husband Henry, Sarah Logan Fisher’s husband Thomas, James Pemberton, and Israel Pemberton, who were rounded up on September 2. None of those exiled would ever be charged with a crime or given a trial. Aaron Sullivan, *The Disaffected: Britain’s Occupation of Philadelphia During the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2019), 1, 4; Smith et. al., *Letters*, vol. 7, 627; Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1958), vol. 3, 74. The Reverend Henry Muhlenberg was the head of the Lutheran Church in North America and was the father of Peter Muhlenberg, a brigade commander in Washington’s Army.

45 Delaware Archives: *Revolutionary War*, 3 vols. (Wilmington, DE, 1919), vol. 3, 1,416. Carl von Baurmeister, “Letters of Major Baurmeister During the Philadelphia Campaign, 1777-1778,” in *PMHB* (Philadelphia, 1935), vol. 59, 409.

Most of Howe's men, meanwhile, remained idle. An aggressive pursuit of Washington's defeated army would have maintained the initiative, forced additional fighting on his terms, and likely crushed or further dispersed the Americans. Howe could have crossed the upper fords on the Schuylkill River with ease, cutting Washington off from his crucial supply depots. Earlier in the campaign, Howe told Lord Germain that he took the long route up Chesapeake Bay so he could threaten those American storehouses, but his continued lethargy gave Washington the time he required to block access to them. Like his propensity for flanking operations, Howe had a history of unenthusiastic follow through after successful battles. Brandywine's aftermath was no different.⁴⁶

Free from having to mount another vigorous defense, Washington took the time to congratulate his army, thanking "those gallant officers and soldiers, who, on the 11th. instant, bravely fought in their country and its cause." He had "full confidence that in another Appeal to Heaven (with the blessing of providence, which it becomes every officer and soldier humbly to supplicate), we shall prove successful." Praying for the "blessing of providence" only went so far, however, and Washington issued orders for the Pennsylvania militia to build redoubts above the Schuylkill River fords.⁴⁷

While Washington praised his army and the militia prepared defensive positions, the Pennsylvania Assembly worried. What was to become of Philadelphia? Washington expressed his views to Thomas Wharton, Jr., president of the Assembly. "As I am well apprized of the importance of Philadelphia you may rest assured that I shall take every measure in my power to defend it," he explained, "and I hope you will agree with me that the only effectual Method will be to oppose General Howe with our whole united Force." Local forces, he added, must be pressed into action. Washington also offered his thoughts on the state of the Delaware River defenses. "In my opinion, the River would be sufficiently secured against any sudden attacks by Water only, if the City Artillery Companies [militia] were thrown into Fort Mifflin, and all the Vessels of War of different kinds drawn up behind the Chevaux de Frize. I have given orders to Colo. [Joseph] Penrose [of the Pennsylvania Militia] to overflow the Grounds upon Province Island, which

46 Reed, *Campaign*, 143.

47 Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, vol. 9, 211.

will render it impossible for the Enemy to approach the Fort in the Rear and raise Batteries against it.”⁴⁸

As far as Washington was concerned, it was impossible to defeat Howe, prevent the British occupation of Philadelphia, and defend the river line simultaneously. The direct defense of the city would have to be handled by the State Assembly, at least for now. With the Continental Army seeking reinforcements, and Congress and the Assembly scrambling to get out of Philadelphia, it was, explained historian John Jackson, “little wonder the State forces were having difficulty in obtaining recruits for the State fleet or to work on the river defenses.”⁴⁹

While Washington agonized over how to counter Howe, Thomas Wharton worried about the precarious state of the river defenses, which had been stripped of nearly every available Continental soldier and militiaman to reinforce the main army. By September 5, there were only 80 men at Billingsport, New Jersey, 45 men manning Fort Mifflin, and none at all at Fort Mercer, the Bush Island redoubt, or the Darby Creek redoubt. The three rows of chevaux-de-frise jamming the river between Forts Mifflin and Mercer were next to useless without soldiers and guns to protect them.⁵⁰

With the Continental Army once more camped around Germantown, the local civilian population cast a wary eye on their property. James Hutchinson mounted his horse to ride out and examine his uncle’s home, which doubled as “General Sullivans Head Quarters.” Thankfully, he reported to James Pemberton, his uncle, “Thy House, Garden, and Orchard, have not sustained any damage, but above 150 Pannels of thy Fence is destroyed, and burnt, most of the Neighbours shared the same (and many of them a much worse) fate, particularly Dr. Bensel, several Cornfields are entirely destroyed.”

Unfortunately for the civilians, the armies would return to Germantown on a scale they could not yet imagine.⁵¹

48 Chase and Lengel, eds., *Papers*, vol 11, 222.

49 John W. Jackson, *The Pennsylvania Navy, 1775-1781: The Defense of the Delaware* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1974), 119-21.

50 Jackson, *Navy*, 118-119.

51 Letter, Hutchinson to Pemberton, 15 September 1777.